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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Security Without the MX

Despite all sorts of misgivings in a variety of circles, the administration seems determined to push ahead with the MX missile system. One of the frequent assertions is that "we have no choice," and that there is no reasonable alternative to the land-based mobile system.

Leaving aside the alternative of placing the new ICBM in either fixed silos or coastal submarines, let me suggest a less expensive and less dangerous option. The major argument for MX is that the fixed land-based Minuteman is so vulnerable that perhaps three-quarters of them could be obliterated by a Soviet first strike. There are several counter-arguments, of course. First, the alleged invulnerability of MX will be very short-lived, as sheer numbers on the Soviet side could all too easily wipe out all the silos: those *with* missiles as well as those that are empty, negating the advantage of uncertainty about where the 200-odd MX missiles are on a given day. Second, as former CIA director Stansfield Turner reminds us, Soviet offensive technology will probably overcome this secrecy of location just about the time that the last installation is in place.

A third counter-argument is that the Soviets will have a strong incentive to pursue both the numerical and technological solutions, given the first-strike threat posed by the accuracy and yield of the MX. The consequences of that sort of response and counter-response are all too familiar by now, and the implications are all too alarming.

Let us, therefore, recognize that *all* land-based missile systems—whether in the United States, the Soviet Union or Western Europe—are, because of their inherent vulnerability, poor instruments of retaliation but excellent for a first strike. Given their low deterrence-to-provocation ratio, both sides would be more secure without them.

Thus, why not begin to phase out the Minuteman and scrap the MX system, putting some of the monumental savings into improving our conventional capabilities? Such a move, especially if coupled with a "no-first-use" commitment, could have some very benign consequences. First, it would reduce the incentive for the Soviets to continue developing and deploying their own counter-force, first-strike missile systems. Second, it might even prompt

the Soviets to follow suit in due course, for the same strategic and economic reasons. Third, if nuclear war were to occur, the destructive levels would be appreciably reduced, given the dramatic reduction in the number and hardness of targets worth striking in a purely retaliatory blow. Fourth, the adversary would still be confronted with the certainty of a massive counter-city assault, given the numbers, reliability and invulnerability of our sea-based and airborne nuclear forces.

In sum, a declaration of "no first use," punctuated by a phasing out of land-based missiles, would end the irresponsible talk of "prevailing" in nuclear war, would soon make both sides more secure and would eliminate the inflationary effect of the current and expected billions allocated to these weapons. More important, it might break the SALT impasse and perhaps even turn the superpowers back to policies of prudence, reason and accommodation. To make this move calls for virtually no military risk, but it does call for political and moral courage. Are we up to it?

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